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ABSTRACT

The history of American early care and education shows the episodic nature of the emphasis accorded young children. In the absence of any single focus, the profession is faced with multiple problems, multiple rationales, and multiple responses occurring simultaneously. Several new approaches to early care reform have been undertaken by different states, all of which reflect efforts that are collaborative and bi-directional (looking backward and forward simultaneously), and emphasize systemic alterations and quality enhancement. Based on a systems approach to reform, five essential functions that would ensure the effective operation of the early care and education system have been defined: (1) collaborative planning and cross-system linkages; (2) consumer and public engagement; (3) quality assurance; (4) professional and work force development; and (5) financing. These functions are not designed to replace a rich visionary process, but to serve as one step in framing what some of the visions might be, and in clarifying the mechanisms necessary to meet those visions. (BAC)

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Quality 2000

Advancing Early Care and Education

Working Paper

The Essential Functions of the Early Care and Education System: Rationale and Definition

Essential Functions and Change Strategies Task Force
Sharon L. Kagan, Editor
Quality 2000

December 1993

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The paper begins from the premise that in order for services for young children to be of quality, a systemic infrastructure must be operative. The paper assumes the challenge of defining the necessary elements of such an infrastructure, offering five key elements: collaborative planning and cross-system linkages; consumer and public engagement; quality assurance; professional and workforce development; and financing. Each element is elaborated upon with specific functions. Potential uses for the essential functions are presented.

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THE ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SYSTEM: RATIONALE AND DEFINITION

Essential Functions and Change Strategies Task Force*
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Quality 2000
December, 1993

INTRODUCTION

If one recounts the history of American early care and education, one can't fail to see the episodic nature of the emphasis accorded young children in our nation. In no small measure such emphases were, in part, responses to major social issues that permeated the economic and political context of specific eras. Economic depression gave rise to the WPA and the nation's first federal effort offering early care and education services to the American populace. World War II led to the Lanham Act and the near universalization of child care. And America's War on Poverty gave rise to our first comprehensive service program for young children--Head Start.

Accompanying, though not necessarily due to, each of the initiatives were advancements in professional thinking that shaped and reshaped the field. New ideas about child psychology

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*This paper emerged as a collective effort of the Quality 2000 Essential Functions and Change Strategies Task Force. Task Force members, all of whom contributed significantly to this effort, include Dwayne Crompton, Karen Hendricks, Karen Hill-Scott, Anne Mitchell, Gwen Morgan, Deborah Phillips, Delia Pompa, Tom Schultz, Jule Sugarman, and Helen Taylor. Nancy Kolben and Patty Siegel provided valuable leadership to the Task Force and made major contributions to this document. Ellen Galinsky and Barbara Reisman served as consultants.

and the growth and development of children were emerging around the time of WPA; the Lanham Act brought with it changed notions about families and the need to extend services beyond the child; and with Head Start came formal recognition of the ravaging effects of poverty, racism, and classism upon children. For whatever reason, it seems that a national social crisis, emphasis on young children, and advancements in the field were correlated with one another.

NO ORGANIZED PROBLEM: NO ORGANIZED RESPONSE

Today, while we teeter on the verge of economic recession, read of border skirmishes in not-so-distant lands, and are painfully aware of racial unrest in our nation, there is currently no single national catastrophe that is consuming public attention and public resources. National energies have not been mobilized to fend off a single foe. If history were the exact prologue to the present, we would have no reason to expect--because there is no single national catastrophe--that this era would pay anything but nominal attention to young children. Yet paradoxically, despite the absence of a single catalyzing issue, young children have recently crescendoed to the national agenda. Why is this the case? What evidence do we have to verify increased momentum with regard to young children? And perhaps most importantly, what are the consequences for young children?

This paper suggests that unlike eras past when federal policy for children took hold around a single major impetus,

today the absence of any single focus or rationale for involvement, combined with a resurgence of interest in the young, is somewhat unprecedented. Rather than a coherent problem to which a coherent solution--usually in the form of a program--emerges, today we have multiple problems, multiple rationales, and multiple responses occurring simultaneously, leaving us at a confusing precipice. Big business, concerned about present and future worker productivity, is focusing on the child care needs of employees to yield a double benefit: by enhancing access to and the quality of child care, the needs of today's working mothers and fathers are supported as are the quality of the educational opportunities afforded tomorrow's workers. Policy makers are also involved in the early care and education field. Concerned with productivity and the benefits of their investments, they stress the need for greater outcome accountability and a renewed focus on the definition and assessment of outcome indicators. Readiness for school has become a clarion sounding vociferously in communities throughout the nation and spurring untold activities by schools, community agencies, and health groups. The reauthorization of major programs, including Head Start, the Family Support Act, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant, has rekindled state and local action among practitioners and advocates. In short, attention to young children is widespread despite the lack of a single catalytic cause.

Not unexpectedly, such breadth of attention results in a breadth of well-intentioned activities. Governors are paying attention to the young via "Readiness Action Teams." Businesses are investing in child care and family support efforts in surging numbers. Policy makers are holding forums and hearings on young children, and new "models" are being advocated by academics and states. Such efforts--often lacking philosophic or operational integrity beyond themselves--are layered onto a moribund non-system of early care and education, already well-noted in the literature (Kagan, 1989, 1991; Mitchell, 1989; Sugarman, 1991, 1993). Sometimes such efforts are complimentary; however, often in the aggregate they become contradictory or redundant. In an effort to reform a school, three or four "inventive" strategies or models are imported simultaneously, leaving staff to feel like over-burdened tourists in their own terrain. Early childhood practitioners, anxious for long-awaited reform, find themselves navigating among multiple initiatives, each demanding time and energy. Overwrought with committees and meetings, they long for time in their own programs. Frustrated with the lack of organization, they lament that the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing; that the abundance of effort--while welcome--is disconnected and disappointing. As one practitioner recently noted, we can't attempt to fix the puzzle by simply adding more disjointed pieces.

NEW APPROACHES TO REFORM

Recognizing that scatter-shot models and programs, no matter how perfect in isolation, will only compound systemic fragmentation, a number of strategies have been offered. Some reforms suggest that the categorical top-down approach to policy construction must be avoided in favor of a more unrestricted bi-directional approach--top-down and bottom-up (Bruner, 1991; Morrill, 1991). Others contend that until we retrain professionals coming into the system to think and perform more holistically, even perfectly integrated models will remain paper ideas, gridlocking the system (Gardner, 1991). Some specify that child and family outcomes, rather than program input, must be articulated and measured to assure systemic and programmatic quality (Schorr, Both, & Copple, 1991). Still others suggest that collaboration across services is a necessary first step to putting the pieces together (Bruner, 1991; Melaville & Blank, 1991; Levy, Kagan, & Copple, 1992; National Commission on Children, 1991). And finally, it has been argued that comprehensive planning, carried out at the community level, must precede new service add-ons and new programs (Kagan, 1991; National Association of State Boards of Education, 1991; Sugarman, 1991).

Such suggestions are promising indeed. States are beginning to think afresh regarding their approaches to service delivery, financing, and regulation. Thoughtful state plans delineating new strategies for serving young children are emerging with

encouraging regularity. Vermont has planned a unified system of child development and family support services with emphasis on coordinated training, common standards for all early education programs, and resource coordination and integration (Mitchell, 1992). Hawaii has created a vision statement of an optimal early care and education system, stressing principles that guide the development of such a system, and making recommendations that span direct services, support services, and system management (NSO Associates, 1992). Similarly, the Maryland Commission on the Early Learning Years (1992) has developed a comprehensive plan for improving early learning programs in Maryland. While focused on the years of four through nine, this effort clearly enunciates a commitment to children's comprehensive development and acknowledges the role of the school as a key partner in the delivery of services to young children. Finally, Missouri has developed a plan--"Missouri's Child Care Infrastructure: Building for the Future"--which recommends legislative action to remove licensure exemptions except in specific cases and administrative action to develop a "seamless system of child care" (Missouri Child Care Advisory Committee, 1992). Beyond these significant planning efforts, states are acting in new ways. As a result of the Child Care and Development Block Grant, states are engaging in collaborative planning, in the development of comprehensive and/or integrated training efforts, and in the coordinated referral of services (Blank, 1993).

Just a few of many initiatives, these kinds of efforts reflect a growing recognition that no single entity or single strategy can begin to handle the complexity of issues and the range of providers, legislation, and conditions that frame American early care and education. Though emanating from different states and different auspices, these plans--and hundreds more like them--share common qualities that reflect the status of the field. First, the efforts are all carried out collaboratively, involving representatives from many fields, disciplines, ethnic backgrounds, and incomes. As such, they attest to the diversity of the field and to the need for inclusive planning.

Second, each of these efforts acknowledges that without some attention to systemic alterations, the care and education of young children will only be marginally improved. Distinct from past eras when plans or reports routinely recommended the development of new programs and services, these efforts all demand building threads between existing programs, working out quirks in the existing systems, and expediting the extant service delivery. They are systemic, rather than programmatic, in orientation.

Third, the plans all acknowledge that attention must be given to quality enhancement. Rather than obliquely gliding over the quality issue, assuming that all is in order, these efforts stress the need to look seriously at current efforts and bring them into quality compliance before adding on more services.

Fourth, the efforts are bi-directional--that is, they look backward and forward simultaneously. They acknowledge past problems and past changes in demographics (increases in poverty and women's out-of-home employment) that have accelerated early care and education challenges, but they do not stop there. Taking these conditions as social imperatives, they set forth fresh action agendas with specific goals and strategies that build upon prior efforts and attempt to push the field forward and outward. For example, most of the new efforts are distinct from past ones in that they explicitly acknowledge the need for advocacy and public information as a part of reforming early care and education.

In short, there is a new ethos permeating the thinking and doing of the early care and education community. It is moving from thinking "we," not "me;" from a programmatic to a systemic orientation. It is thinking long-, not short-term. Recognizing that commitments to young children are beginning to be durable and etched in legislation, the field is not jumping to grab the first dollar that appears. Rather, it is being more thoughtful regarding requests, regulations, and fiscal expenditures. And, finally, the field is thinking strategically rather than episodically--a new logic permeates planning. The field is recognizing that it cannot reform its agenda alone and is reaching out to broaden its constituency; it recognizes the value of incrementalism and understands that seeds need to planted, the soil tilled and watered before the product is finished. However

fragmented the impetus for reform, early childhood practitioners are seizing the moment, replete with its attention and promise of increased resources, and moving forward in planned, thoughtful ways. Early care and education is coming of age.

THE NEED FOR ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS

With such optimism and opportunity come massive challenges. It is no longer sufficient to recognize that we need an early care and education system and that programmatic strategies are incomplete responses to the demands for systemic quality, equality, and access. It is not enough to recognize that we need to develop the capacity for planning across programs. It is no longer sufficient to acknowledge that links are needed between federal, sate, and local governance mechanisms, or that incentives or waivers from the restrictions attendant to categorical programs might be necessary. Finally, it is no longer sufficient to recognize that such massive reform won't happen with haphazard structures and capricious support from the government.

To the contrary, the time has come for hard reflection on strategies that work, on the elements necessary to sustain collaborative planning, and on the results we want to obtain from a reformed system. Important work has been done to chronicle successful efforts at collaborative planning (Family Impact Seminar, 1991; Melaville et al., 1993). Guides utilizing federal and state resources have been written (Levy, Kagan, & Copple,

1991). And quite importantly, handbooks that delineate strategies and resources for building early childhood systems at the federal, state, and local levels have been thoughtfully developed (Sugarman, 1991; 1993).

Less attention, however, has been given to what we want the early childhood system to be. If such a system were successful, what would it look like? In other words, while much attention has focused on the strategies to build the system (the inputs), and on the goals to be achieved for children and families (the outputs), too little energy has been directed at what we want the system ultimately to look like and to be capable of doing (the throughputs). To that end, as its first task, the Quality 2000 Essentials Task Force undertook a discussion of what a vision of an ideal early care and education system might look like (Quality 2000, 1992). Following that discussion and armed with a strong commitment to "a systems-approach," the group has moved forward strategically and conceptually to define what such a system should be able to do, what are its requisite parts, its essential functions.

DEFINING THE ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS OF A SYSTEM

Before turning to the essential functions of the early care and eduction system, it is important to step back and define terms. With help from Webster's, we generally acknowledge that a system is a set or arrangement of things so connected as to form an organic whole. The body is considered a system that is

composed of many essential sub-systems or functions: the circulatory system, the reproductive system, the digestive system, each in place to carry out a distinct function that--when integrated with the functions of other sub-systems--enables the entity to perform as a whole. The function, then, is the specialized or essential action of a component part--a discrete organ--that composes, but does not replace the whole. A function implies performance and action essential to the operation of the system.

In considering early care and education as a system or a whole entity, as has been espoused, we then need to ask what are the sub-systems or essential functions that must be in place to enable the whole system to perform? What are the analogues to the body's circulatory, digestive, and reproductive functions? What are the component action parts that must be in place if the system is to work? The emphasis placed on action in the last sentence is not accidental. Essential functions are not goals, principles, or characteristics that describe the system (e.g., services are tailored to individual children and families; programs meet or exceed licensing standards). They are the operational entities that enable such goals to be achieved. While the field is long on goals, principles, and characteristics, it has not adequately specified its intentions regarding the functional entities that need to be in place to make the system work. It has not specified the "throughputs" that will enable it to reach its goals.

Defining the essential functions--the throughputs--of the early care and education system is an immense task beyond the purview or wisdom of any single individual or group of individuals. Nonetheless, recognizing the need to attend to the essential functions of the system, the Essentials Task Force of the Quality 2000 Initiative, in conjunction with leadership from the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, undertook a preliminary analysis of the essential functions. The work of the group is presented below.

THE ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS

In its work, the Task Force suggested that there are five major functions that must be in place if the entire early care and education system is to operate effectively. The five functions are: (1) ccollaborative planning and cross-system linkages; (2) consumer and public engagement; (3) quality assurance; (4) professional and workforce development; and (5) financing. Each of the five essential functions has several sub-functions that elaborate the nature of the function. In other words, each function is accompanied by durable, readily identifiable mechanism/s that carry/ies out the work associated with the function. For example, the first function, "collaborative planning and cross-system linkages," is necessarily supported by entities that carry out planning, data development and utilization, system evaluation, linkages within and across the system, and transition to school. It should be

noted that not all of these sub-functions need to be carried out by a single entity, but the sub-functions must be the responsibility of some entity or entities within the state and/or locality.

1. COLLABORATIVE PLANNING AND CROSS-SYSTEM LINKAGES

Planning
To create and implement long- and short-range plans across funding and delivery systems that foster coordinated service delivery to children and families;

Data Development and Utilization
To have and use accurate data for planning and assessing service availability, quality, and affordability;

System Evaluation
To establish and maintain mechanisms for annual evaluation of access, affordability, and equitable distribution of services across the system;

Linkages Within and Across the System
To establish effective communication and operational mechanisms that link all providers of early care and education with one another, as well as with health and social service agencies;

Transition to School
To develop the means to ensure cooperation and communication between providers of early care and education and elementary school personnel.

2. CONSUMER AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Parents as Informed Consumers
To provide information and supports that will assist parents in making informed decisions, according to their needs and preferences, regarding the care and education of their children;

Consumer Engagement
To establish mechanisms that enable the field to inform, be informed by, and engage families in

decisions that effect their lives and those of their children;

Public Engagement
To establish mechanisms the field can use to inform and be informed by various communities, and to build coalitions with those not traditionally involved in the field--such as neighborhood, political, and business communities;

Advocacy
To have a durable advocacy capacity that is broad-based, organized, and effective, and includes the ability to influence public attitudes, legislation and institutions, and private-sector workplace policies and practices.

3. QUALITY ASSURANCE

Regulation
To have a system of regulations ensuring that quality is sufficient and is evenly applied to all providers, thus safeguarding children and protecting parents as consumers;

Enforcement
To have a system of enforcement that assures compliance with the regulations;

Voluntary Accreditation
To have a system of voluntary accreditation accessible to all family child care homes, centers, and programs.

4. PROFESSIONAL AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Systematic Training and Staff Development
To establish mechanisms that systematically attract, train, develop, and retain an adequate supply of current and future practitioners in a variety of roles, all of which involve commitment to supporting families, cherishing cultural diversity, and respecting children;

Supported and Valued Workforce
To assure providers work environments that optimize their individual and collective contributions, provide the time and space to rejuvenate skills, and offer adequate compensation and benefits;

Leadership Development
To create mechanisms for developing leadership capacity and to encourage people who can vision, revision, and inspire commitment to the early care and education field.

5. FINANCING

Adequate and Coordinated Financing
To have sufficient, coordinated, and flexible financing in order to aid parents and providers, provide appropriate salaries, cover capital expenditures, and leverage private with public dollars;

Equitable Financing
To assure that financing is distributed so that all children have equitable access to services and so that service quality is equitably available across sectors and populations.

USES OF THE ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS

As a list alone, the essential functions are little more than an academic exercise, albeit one that calls attention to the breadth of functions that need to be in place to foster a quality system of early care and education. Indeed, like specifying elements of pedagogical or classroom quality that are associated with effective outcomes for children, these functions highlight the elements that are associated with an effective early care and education system. Once such elements are identified, even tentatively, they can be examined more systematically and empirically.

The above list of essential functions represents a preliminary effort to specify systemic functions associated with a quality early care and education system. Their veracity needs to be tested. To that end, it is hoped that future analyses will

examine the extent to which these functions and sub-functions exist in early care and education systems. Moreover, it is hoped that the functions will be useful to local and state planners as they consider ways in which to assess the efficacy and efficiency of their own systems. For example, by using the functions as a template, planners could identify which agencies or groups are responsible for which of the functions and sub-functions. Such an analysis may indicate a clustering of groups around one function, while minimal mechanisms might exist to meet other functions. If such an imbalance were found, planners might wish to consider a reallocation of services and/or responsibilities.

More often than not, however, it is likely that rather than an imbalance of responsibility, there will be "responsibility holes," with no entity charged to fill the function. For example, a state may find that there is no one taking lead responsibility for consumer and public engagement around early care and education issues. While not unusual, such holes need to be filled if the system is to function effectively. In this manner, the essential functions might be useful as a diagnostic tool to evaluate the robustness of the system.

The essential functions can be helpful as states and communities expand their role in the early care and education area. Given limited clarity in our federalist system, working collaboratively, states and municipalities could determine who should be responsible for what components based on who has optimal competence. The functions, therefore, might be a helpful

analytic tool to map out key responsibilities and to assess the logical roles of various governmental groups.

Finally, the essential functions can be helpful as a way of assessing the degree to which a community or a state has been successful in integrating services across sectors, components, and systems. With service integration front and center on the national agenda, the functions provide a lens through which to assess one of the most fertile areas for integration--namely, early care and education.

ISSUES REGARDING THE ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS

The material contained herein should be regarded as suggestive and tentative. Little work has been done to verify the completeness or accuracy of the functions. Further, there are some significant limitations to the concept of essential functions.

First, what is deemed essential in one community or state might not be deemed "essential" in another. Recognizing contextual variation, this list attempts to offer a generic catalog of functions that will need to be adapted according to local and state need. As such, the functions presented are not constant, but represent a launching point. Second, and related to the first issue, states vary dramatically in the roles they undertake with regard to young children, making it difficult to prescribe which functions are best assumed at which level of government. While the Task Force had some preferences, it was

agreed that the level--state, local, or shared--where the function was optimally carried out should be left to open to discretion. Third, there was some concern that functions would not be generated in the absence of an overall vision or value context. To be certain, systemic visions must be developed to guide the direction and momentum of all activity. These functions are not designed to replace a rich visioning process, but serve as one step in framing what some of the visions might be, and in clarifying the mechanisms necessary to meet the visions. As such, the functions are tools for analysis that warrant reflection and debate.

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